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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1990-1991

Standards of accommodation for air travel

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

1. In its resolution 45/248 A, section XIII, paragraph 4, of 21 December 1990, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to examine how the discounts and other incentives offered by various airlines could be utilized to provide savings to the United Nations and upgraded travel arrangements to representatives of Member States, experts attending meetings of subsidiary bodies and Secretariat staff without incurring any additional expenditure.

2. Since 1985, the United Nations has entered into agreements with some airlines whereby discounts are earned in the form of accumulated mileage bonuses that are then translated into free tickets, and with other carriers that provide discounts in the form of cash refunds.

3. Free bonus tickets, however, have caused considerable difficulties for travellers and administrators alike because of the restrictions placed on their use. Like charter tickets, these tickets are valid for travel between two points and do not generally permit changes in routing or travel dates. Very often only specific dates are available for travel on such tickets, a limitation which rules out their use in many cases. Furthermore, the tickets can be utilized only on the airlines issuing them, i.e., they cannot be endorsed for travel on another airline. Experience over the past several years has shown, moreover, that it is extremely difficult to determine and monitor the actual mileage bonuses or amounts to which the Organization may be entitled because of a complex system of prorating the earnings from these

among various airlines when several carriers are used in a travel transaction. For these reasons, the system of bonuses has proven to be cumbersome and, therefore, costly to use and administer. On the other hand, cash refunds, although equally difficult to monitor as regards the amounts due, have enabled the Organization to achieve substantial savings, as can be seen from paragraph 10 below.

4. The Secretary-General welcomed the request made by the General Assembly regarding upgraded travel arrangements, particularly in the light of the prevailing quality of service in economy class accommodation in recent years. The diminishing level of service in economy class is attributable, among other things, to the increasing use of discount fares and charter arrangements that attract large groups of travellers. The cramped conditions, excessive noise and inadequate service as well as the lack of suitable airport waiting areas for use during flight delays and between connections add to the fatigue of the journey and make it difficult for the business traveller to use the travel time efficiently.

5. At a meeting in 1989 of the medical directors of the United Nations common system, a review was made of the health implications of travel on long flights in economy class. It was noted that the combination of limited leg room, inaction and dehydration involved certain health risks. The medical directors consequently recommended that all air travel of five hours or more should be in business class. At discussions within the Consultative Committee for Administrative Questions (Personnel and General Administrative Questions) (CCAQ(PER)), several organizations considered the medical directors' recommendation for application to all types of travel (i.e., official travel on mission, appointment or reassignment and home leave) except education grant travel. A number of United Nations specialized agencies have since adopted measures to increase the use of business class to meet such concerns.

6. As requested by the General Assembly in resolution 45/248 A, negotiations were initiated with some 15 of the major airlines with which the United Nations has bonus arrangements. It was proposed that the existing agreements be modified by surrendering accumulated mileage bonuses and foregoing future earnings, in return for upgrades to business class for all excursion and economy fare travel. In every case these approaches met with a negative response. The airlines concerned claimed, inter alia, that they would not be in a position to sustain the degree of financial loss that they would incur if they accepted the United Nations proposal.

7. In the light of the foregoing, the Secretary-General is of the view that consideration should be given to a redefinition of travel time, under the nine-hour rule, to include a reasonable period for airport departure and arrival procedures. The time required for this purpose is not taken into account under existing travel regulations. This proposal would address to some extent the concerns implicit in the Assembly's request regarding upgraded travel arrangements.

8. Most carriers now commonly require check-in procedures to commence two to three hours prior to departure time. This time is needed in order to complete the increased security checks and verification procedures prior to boarding. Similarly, arrival formalities and baggage retrieval often require up to one hour. As a result, if one includes travel time to and from the airport, the total duration of a journey is increased, on average, by four hours or more upon departure and by at least two hours on arrival. Delayed flight departures further add to total actual travel time.

9. Taking into account the above considerations, the Secretary-General is of the opinion that, in determining the duration of a journey, a uniform one and one-half hours should be added to the scheduled flying time for departure formalities and one hour for arrival procedures and travel to and from airports. The proposed measure would increase the use of business class, thus providing some relief from current travel conditions in economy class on long flights.

10. The financial implications relating to the implementation of this proposal at all duty stations are tentatively estimated at some $930,000 for the biennium 1992-1993. In this connection, it should be noted that cash refunds totalling approximately $800,000 are expected to be received from the airlines in the course of the biennium. In accordance with established procedures, the total amount of such refunds will be credited to miscellaneous income. If the General Assembly approves this proposal, it would be the Secretary-General's intention, in view of the provisional nature of the above estimates, to report the additional costs involved in the context of the second performance report for the biennium 1992-1993.

11. Subject to the General Assembly's approval, the above proposal could be implemented on a trial basis for two years commencing on 1 January 1992. The Secretary-General would provide an interim report on the status of the experiment at the forty-seventh session of the General Assembly.